

Abolishing the British Slave Trade

**By
Robert Moore**

On this day, exactly 200 years ago, King George the 3rd, with the stroke of a quill, signed the Act of Parliament abolishing the British Slave Trade and the church bells of London burst into peals of jubilation. As well they should.

For the undoing of the British Slave Trade constitutes one of the great sea-changes (no pun intended) in modern British history. Right up to the 1770s the Slave Trade was regarded by the majority of Britons as a fact of life: as immovable as a law of nature. Anyone against that trade was held to be against not just their country's prosperity, not just against its very being, but against the way the world worked. In short, needing a dose of realism. Yet, 7 years into the 1800s, in 1807 to be exact, both Houses of Parliament voted the Slave Trade out of existence. This amounted to a profound revolution in perception and attitudes. And at the centre of that revolution were people of faith, with Anglicans and Quakers jointly in the lead supported by Methodists, and members of other churches.

From the late 1780s onwards, the campaign to end the Slave Trade was led by two figures: William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. "A shrimp" was what his critics used to call Wilberforce, because he was physically small, frail of body and very bent. But he was a superb orator with a splendid wit. Clarkson, by contrast, was over six-feet tall, strong in limb and stronger in will. Both were men of robust hope, unswerving in their commitment to abolish the Slave Trade, even when everything was going against them. They had the gift of facing down withering disappointments and bouncing back. Those qualities were engendered by the Evangelical Revival which restored fervent piety, scriptural meditation, prayerful patience --- and hefty determination to the life of the Church of England.

As Evangelicals, Wilberforce and Clarkson found the slave trade abominable. Not just because of the ghastly cruelties inflicted on the Africans but because the trade rested on the notion that Africans were not fully human and so could be treated as merchandise. That notion Wilberforce and Clarkson knew be a flat contradiction of Christian faith. All people were God's children for whom Christ's blood was shed: Africans as much as whites.

There was another notion that these two men had no time for: that politics is one thing and morality is another and never the twain should meet. They knew that in attempting to abolish the Slave Trade they were behaving politically and they were comfortable with that. And they worked in tandem: Wilberforce in Parliament, the seat of power, and Clarkson in the country at large where public opinion could be turned into a lever of power. A very strategic partnership.

In this historic struggle, two Africans played a pivotal role. One was Olaudah Equiano, who was born probably in what is now called eastern Nigeria. He knew the horrors of the Middle Passage because he had been in it as a boy. A particularly brainy fellow, he got some

schooling in England at the expense of his owner, the captain of a Royal Navy ship. Later, a slave in Monserrat to a Quaker, he bought himself out of slavery and toured the American colonies, parts of Europe and the Mediterranean by working on various vessels. In the early 1770s he settled in Britain, and in the late 1770s he wrote a very readable political autobiography as his contribution to the movement to abolish the Slave Trade. The book was, a masterful indictment of the Trade, a great success going into many editions. He, too, was an Evangelical Anglican.

The other African was Ottobah Cugoana, also a victim of the Middle Passage. He was a slave in Grenada whose master freed him in England where he was baptised and worked as a servant to a painter to the royal court. A friend of Equiano and a supporter of the Abolition movement, he also published a book on the evils of the slave trade and slavery and called for the abolition of both. The book attracted enough attention to be reprinted three times. Deeply religious, He belonged to an advocacy group called the Sons of Africa which often petitioned parliament to stop the Slave trade.

The odds against these people were formidable. Both Houses of Parliament were composed of property-owners. When they did not own plantations in the West Indies, they had their fingers in the Slave Trade. And the West India Lobby was almighty in Britain. Sugar, the end product of slavery and the Middle Passage was edible gold. Who would dare to have Britain impoverished by the abolition of the means to produce it? The answer was precisely those people who were gunning for the Slave Trade.

In 1787, Clarkson went on horseback to visit Bristol and Liverpool, slaving ports both. His aim: to collect evidence proving that the Slave Trade functioned on callous inhumanity to the captured Africans and cold brutality to the sailors. He was helped by Quakers, long opponents of slavery and all that went with it. He and they created a Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade that same year. It grew rapidly and functioned efficiently, as befitted a Quaker-run organisation, with enviable publicity and brilliant marketing strategies, backed by Quaker money. It had its own printing presses and its own publications. Here was what we now call "civil society" in action with a daring agenda and local committees dotted all over the country. The engraving by Josiah Wedgwood of a shackled slave on his knees asking "Am I not a man and a brother?" appeared on men's and women's clothes and even on teacups – a logo long before its time. It was everywhere. Suddenly the Slave Trade was a hot topic debated in numerous societies and discussed in several newspapers. And appalling interesting to the male species, women began to speak at these debates, a thing never done before.

In mid 1789, Wilberforce introduced his first Bill to abolish the slave trade, and this little twisted man rose to a level of oratory that rocked the House of Commons. The walls of Jericho trembled but they did not fall. Stunned, but not convinced, the Members sent the Bill to committee, sure it would not be seen again. A second attempt was made in 1791, and again it was defeated by a clever move: the word "gradual" was placed before the Word "Abolition" and every member of the House knew it meant "not in my lifetime". By then, the French Revolution had reached its bloodiest stage, and the ruling class of England retreated into a ferocious conservatism whose motto could well have been "Never do anything for the first time". This worked against all the efforts of the Abolitionists.

Wilberforce went on presenting bills nearly every year until 1806, only to have them routinely defeated. The Haitian revolution made the British sugar interests fear that abolishing the Slave Trade would touch off Haitian-type revolts in the British islands,

already showing signs of restlessness. On the other hand, the effect that Haiti had on the supporters of Abolition was to convince them that bringing Africans across the Atlantic would make the British slave-holding territories even more insecure. The argument was that the Haitian revolution was made largely by fresh arrivals from Africa, accustomed to warfare that was becoming endemic in their homeland.

By 1805, the British navy had cleared the seas of French and Spanish ships whether bearing slaves or not. It took the perceptive genius of one of Wilberforce's great supporters, James Stephen, to discern that the remaining sugar colonies of France and Spain were flourishing despite the inability of their own navies to secure fresh slaves from across the Atlantic. He concluded, correctly, that they were being supplied with Africans by British ships sailing under the American flag. Wilberforce and company were waiting for a revelation like this to bring before the House of Commons a new Bill to abolish the Slave Trade. This time, even some of the dyed-in-the-wool supporters of the Slave Trade voted for the Bill to prevent the French and Spanish sugar trade from out-competing their own. And so, on March the 25th, 1807, the British slave trade was finally abolished....200 years ago today!

The men of God got what they wanted, the end to a cruel and inhuman traffic. But the way they got it was by tactical politics which had nothing to do with religious conviction. But this is often the way that the good comes out of the mundane.

The abolition of the British Slave Trade did not mean the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean. That had to wait for nearly three decades, but the genie was out of the bottle. The example of the Haitian revolution did indeed inspire a number of revolts in the British Caribbean in the early 19th century and slavery held its own only precariously and with a great deal of repression. Besides, missionaries, either legally or illegally, had been teaching some of the slaves to read and, by several different ways, British newspapers kept arriving in the Caribbean with news of what the Abolitionists were doing in England. After a very widespread rebellion in Jamaica at the very end of 1831, Members of Parliament decided that they had to pre-empt the devil they saw coming by abolishing slavery. But, with a very British compromise, the Act that ended slavery insisted on a period called "apprenticeship" which both made the slaves legally free and procedurally bound to give the planters unpaid labour.

Thus did the year 1807 usher in a period of tension and expectation among the slaves that made the continued existence of slavery questionable.

Part of the reason we celebrate this anniversary is to remind us that slavery exists in our own time in certain parts of the world. Trafficking of teenage females to satisfy the demands of the sex trade in some regions. Frequently little children are chained to machines in sweat shops to satisfy our demands for handwoven fine carpets and certain items of clothing. And child soldiers are really slaves in everything but name. So there's work for us to do, whether we are public servants or members of civil society. We cannot wait on God only, because He waits on us, or, as St. Augustine once put it, "Without God we cannot do it, and without us He will not do it."

Today's milestone, and the example set by those who worked so hard and so long in Britain and elsewhere, to have the Slave Trade abolished is both worthy of our celebration and our emulation.

References

Bury the Chains by Adam Hochschild

Black Jacobins by C.L.R. James

William Wilberforce, 1759-1833 by Robert Moore and Gerry Rayner, Anglican Episcopal
World